

In the Room Across From His

By

FLORENCE RYERSON

her feet for a considerable period each day, she hailed a rainy Saturday as an excellent opportunity for staying in bed and catching up with her writing. She was working upon a series of articles on practical psychology, and they had been so successful that the first six were already being issued in book form. No, she would scarcely come under the head of neglected genius.

Letitia's only real difficulty was that her obvious youngness and prettiness made it impossible for her college classes to take her quite seriously, even when she screwed back her hair and wore horn-rimmed spectacles. This was a continuous source of annoyance to her; for Letitia was wholly and entirely serious herself. To her well trained mind the world was a problem that must be analyzed and catalogued as rapidly as possible. She had a habit of looking upon life as though it were one great psychological experiment. Letitia was not emotional: that part of her nature seemed to have been omitted. If Cupid himself had appeared before her, she would probably have taken him as an infant phenomenon, and have gone about analyzing his mental processes with unruffled composure.

The only thing left to explain is the attic room, and that is very simple. Letitia was a health crank, and she had looked everywhere before she found a room that fulfilled her requirements for fresh air. When Mrs. Jackson, fat and breathless, toiled up three flights of stairs and showed this garret room she saw at once the fresh-air possibilities of the skylight and engaged it on the spot.

AS she lay in bed this noon she looked about her with a little thrill of pride. When she got her writing out of the way and unpacked the boxes of household goods that the green curtain was concealing it would be quite charming. Her prayer rug could go here, and the mahogany table with the rose droplight over by the window.

She was filled with the pleasures of anticipation when someone tripped in the hallway outside and fell heavily against her door with a muffled expletive. The door, as Fate would have it, was not properly latched, and it flew open, precipitating a young man into the center of the room. Letitia dropped her papers and rolled herself even more thoroughly in her chrysalis of red wrapper. The young man rose from his knees, where the violence of his fall had thrown him, and backed hurriedly out, red with embarrassment. His cheeks were still hot as he let himself into the room across the hall and slammed the door.

Letitia gathered up her papers and started back to work. It had been embarrassing, of course; but no one was to blame unless it was she herself for not latching her door more carefully. And, after all, she reflected, it would not be necessary for her to speak to the man across the way if they met in the hall. He was obviously a gentleman, and would not expect it. So far as she was concerned the incident was closed. She went back to her writing with calm composure.

MEANWHILE the artistic instinct was working in the man across the hall. The artistic instinct was indirectly responsible for most of his troubles; but since he depended upon it for his livelihood he was scarcely in a position to dictate.

The young man's name was Charles Henry Graves, and under the romantic

nom de plume of Claude Clewes he had caused more people to shed tears than any other man in Boston. This was not due to any particular ill will on his part. He wrote "sob stories" for a thriving journal, and nightly the city grew red-eyed over his tales. Under the guise of the sentimental and sympathetic Claude he haunted the city, gathering material for stories with which to dampen the evening subway.

In appearance Charles Henry did not resemble the soulful Claude. He was big and broad, and addicted to green ties and tan shoes. Moreover, he was rarely without a cheerful grin.

Usually his "sob stuff" was manufactured out of whole cloth; but occasionally he ran across a case that was all ready cut out, so to speak. No matter what he might be doing at the moment, his subconscious mind was manufacturing sobs, and he frequently saw tears glistening where no tears were visible to the naked eye.

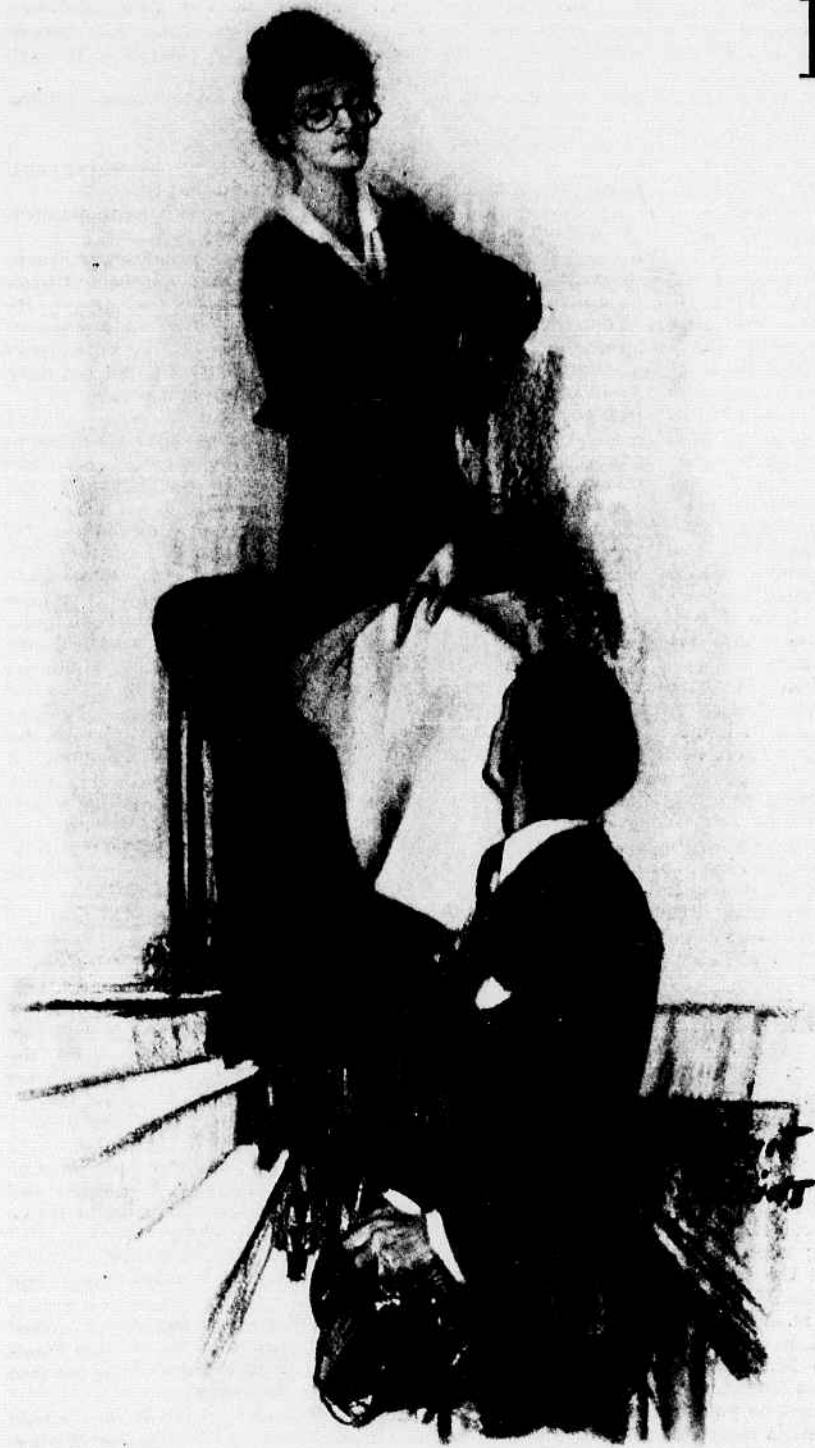
HIS subconscious mind was at work now as he mechanically opened a package and took out a small steak and some onions. He was thinking of the girl across the hall, at first with embarrassment, and then with a sort of professional curiosity. She was really pretty: it was strange he had not seen her before. As a matter of fact he had seen her several times in the street; but Letitia in good-sense shoes, with her hair drawn back from her scholarly brow, and Letitia in a fuzzy red wrapper, with her hair in two braids, were not to be identified as the same person. A picture of her room rose in his mind. Bare, without even a rug upon the floor, the curtains swaying in the draft—and suddenly he had it. Here, at his very door, was a sob story! He hastily put down the onion he was slicing and went in search of the landlady.

He and Mrs. Jackson were old friends. She was proud of having a gentleman who "wrote things" under her roof. It gave her a feeling of intimacy with the literati. Moreover, Charles Henry always paid his rent. As always, Charles Henry found her willing to talk, and gradually he led the conversation around to the girl upstairs. He gathered that she was not in high favor.

Yes, she was a nice girl, though uppish. No, Mrs. Jackson had not talked with her: she didn't care for them as were too proud to talk. Not that she had anything to be proud of; for her clothes were as plain as plain. Yes, she worked somewhere, she didn't say at what, and Mrs. Jackson for one wasn't going to pry into other people's affairs when she wasn't wanted; but she knew the girl wrote, because she got some letters from a magazine. Mrs. Jackson had counted two since she came, last Monday.

No, she didn't take meals with the boarders: she had a stove in her room and cooked there. Mrs. Jackson let the attics do as they liked, as Mr. Graves knew; but when it came to leaving the skylight open in the worst kind of weather, Mrs. Jackson thought some people, naming no names, were crazy. She began dusting the sofa with a disdainful sniff, and Charles Henry returned to his room three steps at a time, swept the steak off his table, and sat down to the typewriter.

TO his practised eye it was as plain as day. Poor working girl, underpaid, half starved, with a spark of divine fire,



"Did you write this drivel?" she asked cuttingly.

IN the very heart of Boston, at the intersection of two of its crookedest streets, stands Mrs. Jackson's boarding house. It is so situated that from the attic windows you can see down both streets at once, which is something that can happen only in Boston. Otherwise there is nothing to distinguish it from the countless other boarding houses that flank it upon each hand. The inhabitants of Mrs. Jackson's rooms on the "second" and "third" are expected to take their meals at her table; but the inhabitants of the "attics" must fend for themselves. There are two "attics," and in the coldest and draftiest lived Letitia Smith, Ph. D.

It was high noon, a chilly, bleak sort of noon; but, by reason of the odors that floated up the attic stairs, unmistakably the lunch hour. Letitia Smith was still in bed. The rain beat upon the skylight with dreary persistence, and the draft that crept through the walls, where the building paper did not reach, blew the curtains to and fro; but Letitia, wrapped in a sort of chrysalis of red wrapper and white blanket, was writing busily upon a pad of paper. Every now and then she paused and curled the ends of her thick braids round her middle finger, and wrinkled her forehead in a frown. Composition was not a simple matter with Letitia.

The room, besides being an attic, was poorly furnished. In fact it was not fur-

nished at all, unless a cot and a stepladder may be called furnishing. It was a distinctly poverty-stricken room.

Admit that you have guessed it all,—attic room, wind blowing through chinks, neglected genius, penniless and hungry, staying in bed for warmth, and sniffing the odors from the meal that is going on below. You are wrong four times out of five. Letitia was a genius; but she was far from neglected. No one who blossoms forth monthly in the pages of Parkinson's Magazine can be called neglected. Her only trouble at the moment was that she couldn't write articles fast enough to suit the ravenous appetite of the editor of that popular periodical. Neither was she penniless. With her salary as head of the psychology department in the university, and the generous checks from Parkinson's, she had a most respectable balance at the bank, a balance that was dedicated to two years of study in Oxford.

The odor of hot lunch from below raised no feeling within her other than annoyance; for she was still warm from a dinner cooked in the chafing dish, which was hidden behind a discreet green curtain that draped the other end of the room. And finally she was staying in bed because at the moment she felt lazy, and for no other reason whatever.

Five days a week she dissected the human mind before the classes at the university, and since it meant standing upon